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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 000737

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: MINISTER OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS SEEKS AREAS OF
CROSS-SECTARIAN COOPERATION

REF: 05 BAGHDAD 04731

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On March 1, PolOff met with Minister of State for Women's Affairs Dr. Azhar Al-Sheikhly. Sheikhly was cautiously optimistic that her proposal to elevate the status of her Ministry would be approved in the new Council of Representatives. She repeated her dismay at the final version of the constitution, lamenting that the document "is taking women backwards." However, she noted that the document reflected the reality that it was written by elected Islamists. She said she believes that changes in society will eventually translate into amendments to the constitution. She highlighted the need to focus in the meantime on issues that unite women, such as political participation, education, employment and healthcare. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Sheikhly's proposal to elevate her Ministry to full Ministry status was approved by the Council of Ministers last year (reftel). However, the issue was tabled and awaits action by the new Council of Representatives after it convenes. Although she expressed confidence, based on the broad support demonstrated for the proposal by the TNA, Sheikhly expressed frustration with the delay, noting that she could not hire adequate staff until she had a budget of her own.

¶3. (C) Sheikhly was clearly disappointed with the exclusion of key women's rights provisions in the new Iraqi Constitution. She was most distressed by the prominent role of Islamic Sharia law throughout the document, but noted that the document had to reflect the reality that it was written by elected Islamists. Sheikhly stated, "either we will accept the democratic process and elections or we will contradict ourselves." She predicted that as Iraqi society develops, citizens will support amendments to the constitution mirroring the changes in society.

¶4. (C) Sheikhly noted that the constitutional process had highlighted the need for education on gender issues. While lobbying TNA members, she said she encountered both resistance and hostility to any mention of "gender equality," with one woman from the constitutional drafting committee asking, "but how can we cancel the biological differences between men and women?" Sheikhly noted that this incident highlights the need for unbiased, basic education on women's rights concepts. However, she said that attempts to promote such education are often perceived as advocacy efforts and are rejected by Islamic conservatives.

¶5. (C) In an effort to reach the broadest possible audience, Sheikhly said she focuses on issues that can unite women across the spectrum) increased political participation for

women, better education and literacy programs, employment programs for widows and improved healthcare services. Sheikhly stressed that she invites women and NGOs from all political and religious affiliations to participate in her programs and prides herself on her reputation for neutrality.

¶6. (C) Sheikhly expressed regret that she was not allowed to attend the Commission on the Status of Women this year. Although she did not directly accuse Jafari, she implied that she interpreted denial of permission for this trip as retaliation for her previously traveling to the U.S. without the Prime Minister's permission. PolOff mentioned the upcoming US-Arab Economic Forum. Sheikhly said that she hopes to attend and "may be in a better position to travel" at that time.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Minister Sheikhly seemed more pessimistic than in previous meetings (reftel). It was clear from her remarks that she does not anticipate retaining her position once the new government has formed. We will continue to underscore with her, her successor and other Iraqi Government leaders that the USG effort to promote women's rights in Iraq -- as demonstrated during the constitution drafting period -- remains a priority for us.
END COMMENT.
KHALILZAD